

## *Somos Hijos[\_as] de La Mina*<sup>1</sup>

an edutainment, art/memorial participatory collective  
theatre, practising *el de-colonisation corporal*

by Sonja Hohenbild

*Even if there is a talk of higher or lower forms of amusement, art does not care since it wants to move high and low and to be left alone as long as it can entertain people by doing so.* Bertold Brecht<sup>2</sup>

*Selective memories cannot be avoided, but they can be counteracted.* Norman Davies<sup>3</sup>

*What is to say, in our terminology, every identity or discursive object, is constituted in the context of an action* Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe<sup>4</sup>

## First Positioning and Approaches

Exploring art as a fundamental part in the development discourse, I don't want to differentiate between popular- and (high)art-memorials. Believing that the most outstanding and moving ones contain both. Like an example described by Anders Høg Hansen (2008) shows:

*Mahnmahl gegen Faschismus -Memorial Against Fascism*  
by Jochen and Esther Shalev-Gerz (1986).

One would like to ask: why as a white (Christian-broad up) German (cultural worker) I didn't choose an example of memorial culture from post-fascist Germany in which rich literature is available?

It has to do with my thinking that in Germany, the fascist past (even though not the present subtle parts) is widely discussed, but Germany, as also a post-colonial society is hardly even known. That is why I have

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<sup>1</sup> We are the children of the mine (translation by the author) – in Spanish the plural is always male; my 'feminist' intervention would mean „sons and daughters“, that is why in Spanish like in English the male and female forms are both not in use as in (progressive, political correct) German. But as in my German ears „hijos“ sounds like „sons.“ I allowed myself to add in parenthesis the female form, not forgetting the *underscore*, which is a placeholder for other thinkable forms like transsexual\_

<sup>2</sup> Cited by Jostein Gripsrud, 2002, p. 96

<sup>3</sup> Norman Davies, 1995, *The misunderstood victory in Europe*, in Stuart Hall, 1997, p. 204

<sup>4</sup> Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe, *New reflections on the revolutions of our time*, in Stuart Hall, 1997, p. 70

chosen a ‘virtual’ text, which in my imagination has a strong social, political and artistic role in changing a post-colonial society.

I came across the Bolivian ‘text’ through a course in Berlin where the method of *corporal de-colonisation* was practiced with “international” Germans\_. I have chosen it understanding colonialism not only as bi-national, but as a global system, which has its roots in enslavement and its branches in our contemporary capitalism. It is a globalized system, which was recently discussed as the *Potosí-Principle*.<sup>5</sup> I will give the discussed ‘text’ different descriptions and call it ‘virtual’ because I neither saw nor experienced it. My approach will be from different angles around the content and not analysing its aesthetic impacts. I will circle around the content, its contexts and the methodology.

My theoretical method will be from a discursive view, exploring the literature on representations, memorials and museums, educational and therapeutic communication, and oral/aural<sup>6</sup> culture. I believe it is not only a memorial or theatre but a place where *actors and non-actors* (Boal, 1992) participate in a collective experience which link them to the historical roots of their post-colonial identities and construct them as active and resistant parts of a society in fundamental change.

What I call the memorial part of the ‘text’ is a mine created in the catacombs of a collective self-built cultural house in El Alto, a city, which grew in the last 50 years from being the poor part of La Paz to an independent ‘million-city’.

In this ‘mine,’ a ritual, symbolic collective participatory theatre-play is practiced, where a *conscientização* (Freire, 1976) takes place, which affects not only the minds but also the (traumatized) bodies.

As part of the cultural initiative *Compa (Comunidad de Productores en Artes)*, *Teatro Trono* is an open theatre group where *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal, 1971) where developed to the method of *corporal de-colonization*. Visitors and actors are discovering their identities by re-enacting the colonial history of the Bolivian Mines and develop an individual power to change their society.

It is important to stress, that my perception is based on a virtual

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<sup>5</sup> *The Potosí-Principle- How Can We Sing The Song Of The Lord In An Alien Land?* is an international exhibition curated by Alice Creischer, Andreas Siekmann and Max Jorge Hinderer, exploring the historical and contemporary notions of colonialism and exploitation, also in respect to the visual production. It is shown in the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sophia in Madrid, im Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin and contemporary in the Museo de Arte and Museo Nacional de Etnografía y Folklore in La Paz.

<sup>6</sup> In the PhD Thesis of Nkechinyere Mbakwe, 2011, *Die Heilung de Wortes: Zur Bedeutug der Oralität in nigerianischen Homevideos*, I learned for the first time the expression „oral-aural“ – highlighting the fact that to an orality, the aurality – the listening- is as important as the speaking part.

perspective – *a mediated experience*.<sup>7</sup> What I am describing is an activist art memorial<sup>8</sup>, which I explore only through the websites of *Compa* and others, interviews and texts by the founder of *Compa* and *Teatro Trono* Iván Nogales and e-mails with Coral Salazar Torrez. She is a Theatre pedagogue and actress who is part of *Compa* in El Alto and Berlin and who did the workshop I participated in. The advantage of this subject position of a “passive” reader/listener is that not the single participatory performance guides me in my analysis but a multitude of statements and impressions from an experience which is not only for everybody diverse, but is each time different as co-defined by the contributors.

The disadvantage is, of course, that especially corporal experiences cannot be explored by only reading about it. For me as a visual artist it is also quite a challenge to describe, or better imagine, a theatre-memorial-museum without having seen more than three pictures. The other disadvantage is my subject position as a white German and as such my means of perception and analyses are limited to an Eurocentric view, even though I am trying to have a critical whiteness perspective. The texts I read were mainly produced in Europe, whereas the ‘text’ I am trying to portray is from South America – a classical ethnological angle.

I try to counteract this subject position by seeing myself as somebody who wants to *learn from Lagos*<sup>9</sup> -from the Global South.

I will describe in short the outline of *Hijos de la mina*, and then try to embed it into some possible discourse formations. I will reflect its healing capacities of a collective trauma as communication for development and compare it to other memorial cultures in Germany.

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<sup>7</sup> Ylva Ekström, 2010, p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> It is not by accident that I always give different names to „The Mine“ or „Los Hijos de la Mina“ – I want to stress the complexity and the difficulty in this complexity to find one stable term for it.

<sup>9</sup> Jochen Becker, *Learning from Lagos*, 30.03.2002, die tageszeitung, Berlin. An article about the 4. Platform of the documenta11 in Lagos – I interpret his title by changing it from Robert Venturi’s ‘*Learning from Las Vegas*’ to ‘*Learning from Lagos*’, that the West should start to learn also from the Global South....

## The 'draft' of *Hijos de la Mina*<sup>10</sup>

*Today we will play, and playing we will learn, two young actresses yell towards the visitors of Compa.*<sup>11</sup>

The participants come in a room, where different pictures of personalities are on the wall. The young contributors are asked who they would like to be. Most of them identify themselves with "Western idols" like Shakira, Madonna or Michael Jackson. The "Other" - people from their own history seems invisible, undesirables, ignored and not known.

The 'history-drama' starts in 1492, a day before *Cristóbal Colón*<sup>12</sup> landed in the Caribbean - the *Inka* Empire.

A *chasqui* (a runner who transmitted messages in the *Inka* times) invites the people to come in the central theatre hall. There an Aymara ritual takes place and the participants dress themselves in the *ponchos coloridos altiplánicos* and become actors. A player in Spanish colonial dress with sabre rushes in and gives a hegemonial speech and pushes "the others into Indios" and ask them why they have Spanish names but looking so "indigene". They have to go down into the mines to work for the colonizers. An accident occurs and the participants have to find a way to resist the *Mita*<sup>13</sup> to organize them and create syndicates. After going through the ups and downs of the *historical and mythological struggles* - knowing that they are playing- *una cartasis colectiva* happens, as described by Iván Nogales.

Finally *an Andine celebration is organized, where everyone is dancing, approaching-, embracing- and seeing each other.*<sup>14</sup> Now the participants are again asked the initial question "Who would you like to be?" and straight away nearly everybody wants to be Juan Minero, Tupac Katari, Bartolina Sisa - the resistance leaders against colonialism.

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<sup>10</sup>Taken from a German radio-feature (in German), an e-mail from Coral Salazar Torrez and a text from Iván Nogales (in Spanish):

The radio feature: Thomas Guthmann, 2009, Onda - Agência radiofónica Latinoamérica-Europa <http://www.npla.de/onda/content/918>, last accessed 20. Mai 2011

The e-mail: I asked Coral Salazar Torrez to give me some information about "Hijos de la Mina" and she sent me some notes and a text by Iván Nogales (without a date): *Teatro Trono - búsqueda hacia y desde la descolonización del cuerpo el arte se hace abrazo - Somos Hijos de la Mina, Bolivia*

<sup>11</sup> Quoted from Thomas Guthmann's German radio feature and translated by the author.

<sup>12</sup> I use the Spanish pronunciation of the born Italian, not because he „discovered“ the Americas firstly for the Spanish, but he is here mentioned in a Hispanic context and the name sounds in Spanish already like ‚Colonization‘ (even though there is no common etymology).

<sup>13</sup> The *Mita* -in this case forced labour- was introduced by the Spanish colonizers to exploit the silver mines and made the autochthons work the half of their working capacity for them.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted and translated from the Spanish text of Iván Nogales by the author.

*Discourse, Foucault argued, never consists of one statement, one text, one action or one source [....]*<sup>15</sup>

My approach is nourished by several texts around the topic, research about El Alto, the *Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia* and its histories, memories and memorials and other ‘mines-as-museums’, as well as my non-verbal experiences in the workshop. The methodology is based on a *discursive formation* in the sense of Michel Foucault and will be carried out by placing the text in its contexts (how I understand and interpret it from afar).

The re-enactment of ‘*the mine*’ cannot be described as a *trans-coding*<sup>16</sup> rather it becomes a symbol of the suffering, the enslavement and exploitation, which formed a collective trauma; but going “through” it means empowerment. ‘*The mine*’ has to be embedded in the *politics* and *poetics* of the cultural house of *Compa*, as part of the change of the society, where the election of Evo Morales might be one indirect outcome of initiatives like *Compa*. It is part of the Multinational State of Bolivia, where under the Ministry of Culture are Vice-Ministries for De-Colonization and De-Patrialization. The becoming or transition, which forms also the most important part of the *corporal de-colonization method*, seems to be reflected in these ministries as well as in the popular “Lucha Libre” which in El Alto is performed by women in *polleras*– also against men.<sup>17</sup>

The *poetics* and *politics*<sup>18</sup> could be seen as a total counter draft of the *power/knowledge* relation of the institution of a museum in the European conventional sense. The creation of meaning of a re-built mine in a cellar is performed by the mythological, spiritual and historical narrative of the ‘Bolivian mine’ and the catharsis of the invocation. The political impacts arise out of the empowerment of the participants and the Aymara rotation system of the “lead actors” where power relations are not practiced. If I compare the *galleries* or the *museum* of *Compa* (both words in use of the *Companistas*), describing ‘*the mine*’ and the whole setting of the oral-aural-visual\_ transmission of the collective memory/history with other mine-museums in Bolivia, I see also differences to the “Western” notion of the museum – especially ethnological and anthropological ones.

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<sup>15</sup> Stuart Hall, 1997, p. 44

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 270

<sup>17</sup> See also: Roland Barthes, "The World of Wrestling", cited also by Hall, p 36 and p. 67 [http://www.tcnj.edu/~miranda/classes/theory\\_practice/barthes\\_wrestling.html](http://www.tcnj.edu/~miranda/classes/theory_practice/barthes_wrestling.html) Even though he talks – of course- exclusively about men-wrestlers it is in his understanding as theatre applicable. -

What is the most striking for me is that the role of the “indio-woman” in her pollera-dress was only visible as servant and market woman – the lucha, symbolizes the transition of the “traditional-woman” to a feminist fighter for a future society – ¡La lucha continua!

<sup>18</sup> As described by Henrietta Lidchi in Hall, 1997, p. 168-187

First it is in the case of the *Museo Ethnológico Minero* in Oruro a mixture of a closed down mine and a ethnological museum, where for example the *Tío*, the spirit-owner of the mountain, a “devil” (translated into Christian terminology) has his “ethnological” place to whom the miners sacrifice cigarettes, alcohol and coca. This form of sacrifice is perverted in a form of “museum” which is more of a human zoo: tourists go in mines, for example in Potosí, Cerro Rico -*Sumaq Urqu* in Quechua- or ‘The Mountain That Eats Men’ where people are still working and “offer” **them** alcohol and coca leaves.<sup>19</sup>

By describing other forms of dealing with history/memory, I want to stress that “the mine project” from Compa, cannot be seen **only** through a cultural lens, as manifold other examples, including a huge miner-hat-memorial in Oruro are to be found in Bolivia- of course that has also to do with the multicultural society, which since 500 years was dominated by the European part. On the other hand there is a link to the self-organization element of the Aymara/Quechua culture and as Raul Zibechi (2005) points out, El Alto was self-built and is since resistant against state power. It is a culture where through collective work, collective decisions and rotation in all areas of life, an anti-state system (in the Western understanding) is in place and through which the revolution that brought Evo Morales into power was initiated and accomplished.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Described by many (Western) travellers, like in this web site from George Kalli, 2006, *Surviving the Potosi Mine – Potosi, Bolivia*: <http://www.bootsnall.com/articles/06-08/surviving-the-potosi-mine-potosi-bolivia.html>

<sup>20</sup> This system with its small self organized neighbourhood administrations was too different from the European-based “democratic” system, that for example US Aid wanted to transform it into bigger administrations as Alex Arnold wrote (in German): [http://www.ila-web.de/artikel/ila315/bolivien\\_elalto.htm](http://www.ila-web.de/artikel/ila315/bolivien_elalto.htm)

## *'Hijos de la mina'* as Healing Process of a cultural trauma

*The relations between knowledge, power and the body in modern societies*<sup>21</sup> leads us to the collective or cultural trauma of the Bolivian society where the method of de-colonizing the bodies tries to manifest itself. Nkechinyere Mbakwe, (2011, p 30-33) discusses the trauma in its cultural form in respect of the enslavement and colonization of West Africans. She points out, that the cultural trauma is related to the collective one but stresses more the narration of the traumatic history.

[...] *a narrative about a destructive social process develops and demands for emotional, institutional and symbolic reparations* [...]<sup>22</sup>

In this reading of trauma, the cultural trauma makes members of a society not only victims of their traumatic past (or present) but enables them consciously to empower themselves by forming a common narrative which assists them to form a community of identification and raise their voices together.

*However tortuous the trauma process, it allows collectivities to define new forms of moral responsibilities and to redirect the course of political action [...] collective traumas have no geographical or cultural limitations (Alexander 2004, 27).*<sup>23</sup>

The trauma has to be integrated in the healing process into political, social and cultural actions.

In this sense, I understand *'Hijos de la mina'* more and more as upcoming of the Andine culture, even though the *Companistas* do not understand themselves as *idígenistas* but integrate European ideas like the trauma (respectively psychoanalysis), the already creole ideas of Freire and Boal and theatre itself in their work-in-progress. But this constructive form of *metizaje* or *créolité* is from my understanding already the strength of non-western societies –*the notion of hybridization as a social concept*, as Ylva Ekström writes, quoting Néstor Garcia Canclini:<sup>24</sup>

*Within this view, the distinctions between traditional and modern, rural and urban, high, mass, and popular cultures lose much of their sharpness and relevance [...] This cultural hybridization*

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<sup>21</sup> Hall. p. 47

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 33. Translated from the German by the author

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 33.

<sup>24</sup> Ylva Ekström ,2010, p. 46 - I don't see the difference of creolization versus hybridization as described in Ylva Ekström, p. 48, discussing the argument of Ulf Hannerz, that creolization would stress more the asymmetric relation, but where the „peripheral“ part would have more of an active role. I use *hybridization*, *creolization* as well as *metizaje* interchangeably- thinking that the active parts, as well as the power relations are always implied.

*results in negotiated realities in contexts shaped by traditions, capitalism, and modernity [...and] the concept of hybridization should in no way be interpreted as the exhaustion of Third World imagery, cosmology, and mythical-cultural traditions. (Escobar 1995:218ff)<sup>25</sup>*

In the appropriation and developing of the ideas of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal, the *Companistas* work on an active *métizaje* and transform the destiny of the Andine people from a dependent, colonized and further exploited people to a culture of agency and power. The method of de-colonizing the body is a holistic vision for the healing-process of the Bolivian people and therefore I understand it as a sustainable form of communication for development.

I dare here to relate the Bolivian and the German society, which are both post-colonial societies, even though it is not so evident in the German one but evident in the treatment of migrants, for example. Augusto Boal said in 1979 in Hamburg that his methodology of

*the Invisible Theatre was not so easily applicable in Germany as the suppression mechanisms in Germany were much too subtle to become visible through the Invisible Theatre.<sup>26</sup>*

One of my questions is: would the method of corporal de-colonization as it is performed in *Hijos de la mina* and the other artistic empowerment of *Compa* work also in the German society were the majority are *hijos de los colonizadores*?

I guess to answer this question, I would on one side have to participate in this ‘theatrical re-enactment of our un/common history’ and on the other would need more workshops with Coral Salazaar Torrez.

My theory though is that in Germany we have to find our ‘own’ process of creolization, which could be vital in the healing process of de-colonization.

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<sup>25</sup> in Ylva Ekström, 2010, p. 47

<sup>26</sup> [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augusto\\_Boal](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augusto_Boal),  
the quote in German was translated by the author

## The Mine of Memory

### 'the mine' as 'living memorial' in a history/memory discourse with an excursion to Berlin

*Commemoration monuments, as we know them, no longer correspond to the hopes and aspirations of a society that orients itself more and more everyday toward movement and procedure by refusing the status quo. It seems to me that, today, reflective thought on the movement must lead to creating a space where our reflections, our emotions, our approaches toward historical data can be deepened by stimulating our current convictions in regard to this data, as the past is only a tool for considering the present.*<sup>27</sup>

Although I understand 'the mine' as memorial, it is far more than that - even when you compare it to yet innovative memorials, which are also no longer monuments of monument size. The mine-memorial I consider a space as Esther Shalev-Gerz described it above. Inspired by Pierre Nora for me its a *realm of memory* or a *lieu de mémoire*, which is not the very place of the mines, as the ones of the *Stolpersteine - Stumbling Stones*<sup>28</sup> described by Anders Høg Hansen. *Hijos de la Mina* create a space for a political and emotional approach to „the past“, which I am trying to find in Germany as well.

Another *stone* of contention (as we say in Germany) is the so-called *Africa-* or *Herero Stone* in Berlin, which essentially is about *bones* of contention and here I come back to my initial statement on why I discuss the 'memory' of colonialism and not the 'History-with-Capital-H' of the Holocaust.

This stone commemorates the German „*Schutztruppensoldaten*“, an euphemism, meaning “protection soldiers” who fought in the German colony “*Deutsch Südwest Afrika*”, today's Namibia. These soldiers in the name of Germany, committed the first genocide in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – totally forgotten or denied today, but honoured at the *Garnisons Friedhof* (Military Cemetery). Next to it on the Islamic Graveyard one of the leading

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<sup>27</sup> Esther Shalev-Gerz, 1998

<sup>28</sup> Anders Høg Hansen, 2008, p.11

- *Stolpersteine - Stumbling Stones*, initiated by Gunter Demnig, 1993, Now in many cities in Germany and throughout Europe before houses where Jewish Germans and Jews from other countries lived and where deported and killed- on his website – <http://www.stolpersteine.com/> - Gunter Demnig mentions also the Sinti and Roma (but in the political incorrect form as 'gypsies'), the political persecuted, the homosexuals (also no contemporary form), the Jehova Witnesses and the victims of euthanasia – no “post”-colonial victims like Africans or Black Germans are mentioned, even though in 2007 the first *Stolperstein* for an African was inaugurated; but due to research of others of whom actually this decentral memorial project is living.

figures of the genocide on the Armenians, Talaad Pascha, was buried – close to the mosque, where incendiary attacks are happening frequently today.

Here, it was only in 2004 that the Africa Stone was restaurated by revisionist forces. In 2008 after years of pressure from anti-colonial groups, a small commemorative plaque was installed, which even does not admit the genocide on the Herero and Nama and therefore is not accepted by the community and the activists.

This side in Berlin, which could be found everywhere, as Hito Steyrl wrote in her co-edited book *'Does the subaltern speaks German?'*<sup>29</sup> shows and hides the layers of histories and divided memories – the *palimpsests*, as Andreas Huyssen discribed Berlin. Even small commemorative plaques of the German colonial crimes are found only three times in Berlin: at this *Garnisonsfriedhof*, at the place where the Berlin-Conference<sup>30</sup> took place (2004) and the single *Stumbling Stone* for Mahjub bin Adam Mohamed (2007), which is also more perceived as a national-socialist crime. Even though I agree with Andreas Huyssen about Berlin as palimpsest, I wonder if in this case of small plaques – no memorial, no political-artistic interventions – one could describe the memory-culture here as overwriting the in/visible colonial past. Because in as much as from slave traders to colonialists, street-names are still present, these names are hardly known. With this excursion, I wanted to reflect on how de-colonial-memorials in Germany could be initiated -but we are far from a discussion about that. Here we are at a point that it has to be considered -as a first step to change street-names and memorials which honour the perpetrators.<sup>31</sup>

Contrasting the poor Berliner examples to remember its colonial history to *'Hijos de la mina'* as living memorial with its attempts to change the society, it is for me important to portray a model of how memory and the different, palimpsestic, hybrid histories with small 'h' could be narrated in the post colonial, post fascist, post divided\_ Germany.

That doesn't mean that the methodology of this specific form of *Theatre of the Oppressed* could be adapted one to one in the German society. It is more the effort of a collective, anti-hierarchical, self-determent, artistic and political group, working on their own de-colonization as well as their society which inspired me and which I miss here widely.

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<sup>29</sup> Hito Steyerl, Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez (edit.) *Spricht die Subalterne deutsch?* Migration und postkoloniale Kritik, 2003, Unrast, Münster, Translated by the author

<sup>30</sup> In the Berlin Conference 1884/85, also referred to as Africa Conference or Congo Conference, the European forces sliced the African Continent like a cake and gave the pieces to themselves.

<sup>31</sup> Besides, that there is hardly a political will to change anything in this direction, there is also a controversy, if the names should be changed or left with commomorative informations about the atrocities. Only 2010 the first colonialist\_ name in Berlin was changed from Gröben-Ufer to May Ayim Ufer.

Taillight for the beginning of going deeper into the mine of hybrid histories by creolization – ‘*après la lettre*’...

Closing, I am trying to stay in the *poetic politics* of the mine, which could be seen after Boal as an ‘*ensaio*’ –rehearsal- *for the revolution*, as ‘*Poética do Oprimido*.’ By developing August Boals Theater, the Bolivian\_ Artists\_ are also initially transforming the ideas of Berthold Brecht, which were developed in *Teatro do Oprimido*. He transformed the notion of the catharsis, thinking that catharsis could leave the spectator in his passive position but with involving him/her in the theatrical-political process not only *conscientização* (Freire, 1976) is achieved, but *dinamização* - *dynamization*- <sup>32</sup>

*Stop: c’ est magique!*<sup>33</sup> – [mais...] by involving the catharsis again in the de-colonialization process, the healing process of “the miners” is integrated again by the *Companistas* who open up their influences of creolization to Europe *¡también!*

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<sup>32</sup> Henry Thorau, Theater der Unterdrückten in Theorie und Praxis, 1982, Schäuble Verlag, Rheinfelden

<sup>33</sup> Title of August Boal’s last book

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